VANITY FAIR

HWD

Hollywood Assistants Know Everything—And Might Be Ready to Start Talking

Overlook talent agency, movie studio, and production company assistants at your own risk: they hold the keys to the kingdom, and are taking notes on every Tinseltown tête-à-tête.

by MARGARET HEIDENRY

AUGUST 9, 2018 3:36 PM

by Clifford Ling/ANL/REX/Shutterstock

On July 19, **Amy Powell,** the head of Paramount TV, was fired, and asked to leave the studio lot on Los Angeles's Melrose Avenue immediately. What set this dramatic dénouement in motion was mundane: a notes call—Hollywood speak for creative feedback—between Powell and other executives about a TV series based on the film *The First Wives Club,* which is being rebooted with an African-American cast. Two days later, Powell's 14-year career at Paramount was over, after she allegedly made racially offensive remarks on the call—and then denied it.

While Powell has engaged attorney **Bryan Freedman**—who alleges the firing was due to gender bias—what remains undisputed is who reported Powell's comments to H.R. and spurred the investigation. It was someone Powell likely didn't register was on the line: the assistant to another executive.

Few outside of Hollywood understand the insight of and the access granted to film-industry assistants. "I'd say every call in Hollywood has no fewer than four people on it," said an employee at a management company, one of four current and former assistants interviewed for this article. "You have the two people who are actually talking, and then both of their assistants, who are on mute and listening in."

The thinking behind this compulsory eavesdropping is simple: subordinates hear the day-to-day business that needs attending to, from scheduling travel to sending out scripts, without a boss having to tell anyone specifically what to do.

Beyond that, party-line calls are the cornerstone of an apprenticeship that largely hinges on observing the film business up close. "Let's say your boss has to fire someone's client. You're listening in and learning how to fire someone while maintaining a good relationship," said the manager's assistant. Most A-list agent, manager, or executive careers launch only after years of overhearing every word uttered between Hollywood insiders. (Powell herself started as an assistant at Sony Pictures Home Entertainment.)

But mastering how to gently lower the boom is not all these honchos-in-training overhear.

"It's generally understood by 99 percent of the industry that the assistant is on [a call]," said the production-company assistant. "That being said, people also forget about us." She described her time working at a major talent agency as "the entertainment equivalent of the C.I.A. You know everyone's secrets." A former studio assistant felt he had "full locker-room access; you see firsthand what's going on." For those calls that demand utter discretion, the top brass will sometimes say, "Hey assistants, drop off," after which those on the lower rungs are supposed to hang up, according to the manager's assistant. "I've heard rumors that people don't drop off."

Employees must sign confidentiality agreements upon being hired, which are meant to protect the top-secret information they'll inevitably overhear. And the staffers interviewed agree that anything related to the details of putting a movie or TV project together is kept strictly under wraps. But "interpersonal stuff," as one woman described it, is fair game as long as it's in the press.

Which agent axed a flunky after leaving her own cell phone in the back of an Uber and waiting too long for its return; which female producer threw a metal Rolodex at her subordinate's head; who has an escort service number listed in his phone—these are all subjects that might come up once fellow assistants know each other well enough to do away with small talk.

The information is traded to steer each other toward a good "desk"—jargon used to describe the work they do as the de facto gatekeepers to Hollywood players. One successful screenwriter, who was once an assistant himself, goes out of his way to be nice to everyone sitting outside the office of a powerbroker: "I know assistants need every boost they can get," he said. "It's a grueling, grind of a job." Others are not so savvy.

Generally, it's still unusual to find someone low on the totem pole willing to speak out about questionable behavior—even in the supposedly more empowered, Time's Up era. "I think you say something when you're ready to burn your bridges or it's truly awful," said the manager's assistant—perhaps like ex-assistant **Rosette Laursen,** who made headlines in 2017 when she published on Facebook a sexist screed her boss had accidentally e-mailed her. Otherwise, bringing bad or ugly chatter to light might blow up your career.

Instead, they believe the industry will truly change only when the assistants themselves graduate, slipping behind those desks. Their millennial values have yet to be fully reflected in Hollywood's business culture—but someday, they will be. "It'll be our generation rising up through the ranks and stopping [bad] behavior organically rather than a concerted backlash like #MeToo" that truly changes Hollywood, said the manager's assistant. That change could also affect the existing boss-lieutenant power strictures.

"I think about my friends who have abusive bosses, and they're not going to be like that" when they're in positions of power themselves, said the production-company assistant. "I hope that our generation is the one to break that cycle." In the meantime, all the assistants will keep watching, learning, and listening.